From ironic distance to unexpected plot twists: unreliable narration in literature and film

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From Ironic Distance to Unexpected Plot Twists: Unreliable Narration in Literature and Film

In terms of narratological research, the relationship between film and literary studies has always been ambiguous.[1] On the one hand, film scholars have borrowed extensively from literary narratology, due to its advanced level of sophistication. On the other hand, they have been eager to stress differences between the two media and the necessity for thorough revision of the concepts adopted from a "foreign" field. Narrative theory has thus been enriched but also complicated. In my paper I will argue that in the case of *unreliable narration* the differences between literary and filmic narration have been overstressed, leading, on the one hand, to unnecessary confusion between narrative constellations which should be held apart, and preventing, on the other hand, the assessment of constellations that are in fact similar in the two media.

The term "unreliable narrator" was introduced in literary theory by Wayne Booth in 1961 and has since been used, further developed and criticized by many scholars (e.g. Yacobi 1981 and 2001; A. Nünning 1998b and 2005; Phelan/Martin 1999). In film studies, for a long time it was only occasionally employed (e.g. Chatman 1978 and 1990; Bordwell 1985; Kozloff 1988; Buckland 1995), until in the last decade a wave of publications appeared on the subject, especially in Germany, mainly due to academic conferences and their proceedings (Liptay/Wolf 2005a; Ferenz 2005 and 2008; Helbig 2006a; Blaser et al. 2007; Laass 2008; Hansen 2008; Kaul/Palmier/Skrandies 2009). A scrutiny of film studies publications quickly reveals that many authors speaking about unreliable narration refer to a narrative form considerably different from the one usually associated with unreliability in literature. Before examining some of the reasons for this transdisciplinary change of meaning, I would like to draw attention to crucial differences by opposing the two narrative

1 A slightly different version of this paper has already been published in German (Brütsch 2011b). I would like to thank Henry M. Taylor for a thorough revision of the English version and Guido Kirsten, Barbara Flückiger and the editors of this volume for helpful comments and discussions.

forms. The following comparison is of course a simplification, since I will not, in this first step of my argument, take into account the diversity of the notion of unreliability in either field but rather concentrate on two "prototypes" which correspond to the examples most often cited by film and literary scholars.[2]

The Standard Example in Literary Studies

In literary studies, unreliable narration is generally associated with a first-person or homodiegetic narration shaped in such a way as to allow readers to adopt an understanding of diegetic reality which differs from the narrator's account (and corresponds to the implied author's view, if such an entity is assumed).[3] The discrepancy between these two assessments establishes a distance, endowing the reader with a privileged position from which he or she can obtain an understanding the narrator does not have. The "uninformed" version of the narrator is the only one conveyed explicitly. An implicit meaning at odds with the narrator's account must be actively constructed by the reader, drawing on knowledge of the world in general and of fictional narratives in particular.[4] The narrator is usually not aware that his account or judgments would seem problematic to the addressee. For this reason, he cannot be considered guilty of deliberately lying or deceiving. On the contrary, he often appears quite honest, as when he openly acknowledges wrongdoings or declares to be evil.[5]

Conflicts between the narrator's statements and the reader's understanding usually arise early on, and the discrepancy between the two often persists until the end. In most cases, there is no final reconciliation of the diverging views, since neither the experiencing nor the narrating I gain the necessary understanding. The introduction of the discrepancy does not necessarily trigger a surprise reaction on the part of the readers,[6] and if so,

2 A more nuanced analysis taking into account some aspects of the historical change in the understanding of the concept will be given in the last part of the paper.

3 On the problematic notion of the implied author, which I will not discuss in this paper, see A. Nünning 1998b: 5–17. For a critical discussion and reconceptualization of the implied author in film narration see Alber 2010.

4 For a detailed analysis of the reader's cognitive activity involved in projecting unreliability, see A. Nünning 1998b: 23–32.

5 As we will see below, the concept of unreliability has sometimes been expanded to include consciously lying or deceiving narrators, even though this implies a major shift in the narrative constellation and, consequently, in the effect on the reader.

6 Here I disagree with Monika Fludernik (1999: 78 and 2005: 40) for whom a moment of revelation or surprise effect ("Aha-Erlebnis") is among the necessary and central characteristics of unreliable narration in literature, as well as with Volker Ferenz (2005: 143 and 184) who refers to Fludernik on this issue. Terms such as "moment of revelation" and "Aha-Erlebnis" imply that readers are first made to believe in something which then suddenly turns out to be wrong; *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* clearly features this kind of narrative structure (which is why I consider its effect to be close to the one I will describe as characteristic for the filmic prototype), whereas in most other examples Fludernik cites (e.g., "The Yellow Wallpaper," *The Black Cat*, *Castle Rackrent*, "Oil of Dog," "Haircut," *The Remains of the Day*, "The Disappearance," "Butterflies") the unreliability of the narrator (or reflector in the case of "The Disappearance") can be established either early on or gradually over a period of time. In his definition of the unreliable narrator in literature, Ferenz precisely writes that readers have "reason to suspect," "sense a discrepancy" and "begin to call the character-narrator's statements into question," a description not in accordance with the abrupt reversal typical of a surprise revelation.

rather at the beginning than towards the end. Accordingly, the narrative dynamic is not oriented towards a major final plot twist.

This narrative constellation can be considered as ironic. The narrator's statements themselves, however, are not ironic. He really means what he says. But the narrative text as a whole is shaped in such a way so as to suggest or at least enable an alternative or even opposite interpretation.[7] Focalisation is also of interest, since the reader can obtain a position in which he or she not only knows more than the main character, but also more than the narrator. In the standard equations measuring the flow of information—the narrator conveys to the reader more, the same, or less knowledge than the character possesses[8]—this case is not accounted for.

Examples of this "prototype" are Mark Twain's novel *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), where the narrator blames himself for helping an African-American slave to escape from his master, a judgment which can be expected to be inverted by readers condemning slavery. Or Ian McEwan's short story "Dead as They Come" (1978), in which the narrator tells the story of his passionate love to a woman who, as we soon find out, is not a living human being but a mannequin in a shop window.[9]

7 Whether readers actually adopt a diverging view by projecting unreliability onto the narrator depends to a large degree on their own world-view and predispositions, which may change over time, as Vera Nünning (1998), arguing from a cognitivist stance, has shown. Since my aim in this paper is to point to differences in narrative structure between diverse categories of unreliable narration, my focus is not on the possibility of diverging interpretations of the same narrative texts.

8 E.g. Todorov (1966: 141–142) and Genette (1972: 206).

9 Further examples are "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Oil of Dog" (1911) by Ambrose Bierce, "Haircut" (1925) by Ring Lardner, or *The Remains of the Day* (1989) by Kazuo Ishiguro.

Standard Examples in Film Studies

When film scholars use the term unreliable narration, they often refer to the following constellation:[10] filmic narration presents the events of the story in a way as to prompt the audience to make erroneous inferences regarding the reality of characters, events, or entire worlds. The real state of affairs is only revealed in the end. The narrative's dynamic is thus geared towards a final plot twist.

The narration usually deceives the spectator by restricting perspective and knowledge to the central character, who turns out to be the victim of an illusion of some kind.[11] The aligning of spectator and character continues until the end, since the final revelation usually enlightens them both. On the other hand, the surprise ending establishes a distance between the spectator and the narration which turns out to have withheld crucial information.

Examples of this "prototype" are La rivière du hibou (aka: An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge, Robert Enrico, France 1962), in which we learn at the end that the protagonist's adventurous escape from captivity and execution was only a last-minute fantasy before dying,[12] or The Sixth Sense (M. Night Shyamalan, USA 1999), in which it turns out that the main character, a psychologist watching over a boy who sees ghosts, is himself a ghost.[13]

A similar narrative constellation is possible with voice-over narrators. David Fincher's *Fight Club* (USA 1999) deceives the spectators in the same way as *La rivière du hibou* or *The Sixth Sense*, even though the story is (in part) told by the main character himself, who has become aware of the unreality of his schizophrenic delusions, but restricts focalization to his former self who experienced them as real (cf. Vogt 2009: 45–49).

Stage Fright (Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1950) and *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, USA 1995) are also often cited as paradigmatic instances of unreliable narration in film. These two examples, featuring character-narrators who are lying (and not just conveying their former delusional

10 E.g. Liptay/Wolf (2005b: 15), Helbig (2005 and 2006b), Hartmann (2005), Lahde (2005 and 2006), Thoene (2006), Laass (2006: 257–258), Orth (2006) and Poppe (2009).

11 Typically the narration gives various clues as to the illusory nature of the protagonist's perceptions already before the ending, but makes sure the hints are subtle enough to not give away the surprise. See Helbig (2005) and Brütsch 2011a: 182–211).

12 For a close analysis of the narrative structure in Enrico's short film see Brütsch 2011a: 204–207 and 292–295.

13 Further examples are: *Dans la nuit* (F 1929), *The Woman in the Window* (USA 1944), *Angel Heart* (USA 1987), *Abre los ojos* (Sp/F/I 1997), *The Matrix* (USA 1999), *Vanilly Sky* (USA 2001), *A Beautiful Mind* (USA 2001), *The Others* (Spain/F/USA 2001), *Identity* (USA 2003) and *El Maquinista* (Spain 2004).

experience as in *Fight Club*), even though different from the ones mentioned above as regards the distance between spectator and character-narrator, still adhere to the basic constellation of the false lead which is only revealed at the surprise ending.[14]

Dissimilarities Between the Two Standard Examples

In order to highlight the differences between these two notions of unreliable narration (which I will subsequently call the literary and filmic prototype), I have compiled a list with important differences:

	literary prototype	**filmic prototype**
deception of reader/spectator	no	yes
distance between reader and narrator/pectator and character	yes	no (exceptions see above)
distance between reader/spectator and narrative text as a whole	no	yes
discrepancy	between narrator's version and reader's reconstruction	between first and second version
irony (implicit vs. explicit version)	yes	no
dynamics/dramaturgy	continuity	final twist
surprise	no (or only minor at beginning)	yes
focalization/subjectivity	subjectivity → objectivity	objectivity → subjectivity

Deception: In the literary prototype, the reader is not deceived (or only at the very beginning), but on the contrary recognizes illusions or misunderstandings on the part of the narrator. In the filmic prototype, the spectator just as the main character are deceived until the surprise ending.

14 For Ferenz (2005: 134), only literary scholars "have always shared a common vision of the concept of the unreliable narrator," whereas in film theory "profound confusion" reigns between different concepts. While I acknowledge that film scholars have over time used the term unreliability in different ways—a topic I will adress below—I would argue that, in the last decade at least, there has been a trend towards associating it with the narrative constellation I have described. When I use the term "prototype," I do not mean to imply that there are no other narrative strategies called unreliable by some film scholars (as for instance narrative ambiguity in European art films or narrative inconsistency in the films of David Lynch), but merely that it has become increasingly frequent to use the concept for what in German is called "rückwirkende Überraschungsgeschichte", i.e. films giving false leads and ending in a major plot twist which forces spectators to reassess the whole story retroactively. In accordance with Vogt (2009: 43–52), I see no major difference whether this narrative strategy is accomplished with or without character-narrators.

Distance between narrational instances: In the literary prototype, there is a distance between reader and narrator, but none between the reader and the narrative text as a whole. In the filmic prototype there is no distance between spectator and character, but implicitly between the spectator and the narrative text as a whole, which becomes explicit in the final revelation.[15]

Discrepancy: In the literary prototype, there is a discrepancy between the narrator's version of the story and the reader's understanding and reconstruction of that same story. In the filmic prototype, there is a discrepancy between the story version first conveyed by the narration and the one it reveals in the end.

Irony: The narrative constellation in the literary prototype is ironic, since an implicit meaning can be construed which differs from the explicit one. In the filmic prototype, there is no such ironic duplicity (in any case on a first viewing), since the reconstruction of the alternative version is explicitly carried out by the filmic narration.

Dramaturgy: In the literary prototype, the discrepancy is established early on and remains until the end. In the filmic prototype, the discrepancy becomes apparent only at the moment when it is finally revealed.

Surprise: In the literary prototype, there is no surprise effect (or only a minor one at the beginning). In the filmic prototype, the entire dramatic structure is oriented towards the final plot twist.

Focalization/Subjectivity: In the literary prototype, even though the point of view is restricted, the reader by projecting unreliability and drawing on his own knowledge, is able to acquire a broader perspective. The dynamic is thus one from subjectivity to objectivity. In the filmic prototype, it turns out at the end that the spectator was restricted to the experience of the central character in a much more fundamental way than at first seemed the case. The dynamic is thus one from objectivity to subjectivity.[16]

15 As mentioned above, in films in which the "wrong" version is conveyed by a character-narrator—as in *Stage Fright*, *The Usual Suspects* or *Fight Club*—there is of course a discrepancy in knowledge between spectator and character-narrator, but this becomes obvious only with the plot twist at the end. Moreover, in cases where the character-narrator is not lying but merely relating what he lived through (as in *Fight Club*), there is no distance between spectator and experiencing I (as opposed to the narrating I). And in the former two examples with lying character-narrators the spectators are aligned cognitively with the characters to whom the false account is related (who in the case of *Stage Fright* also turns out to be the main character).

16 The only publications to my knowledge to address several of these differences systematically are Vogt 2009 and Koch 2011. Koch's article, which on key issues holds similar views as presented here, was published at the same time as the original German version of this paper.

In view of this long list of differences the question arises whether there are any similarities at all between the two constellations, especially given that many film scholars have transferred the concept of unreliable narration from one to the other. There are of course parallels between the two at a rather general level. The fact that there is some kind of deception and discrepancy connected to the process of narration and reception, that something must be interpreted differently than the narration suggests, seems to be the common ground justifying the transfer. Nonetheless, the list I have presented shows that these rather unspecific similarities are outweighed by a number of important differences which become obvious as soon as one examines where exactly the discrepancies and deceptions are located.

Of course one may object to my prototypes that they exaggerate differences and disregard distinctions already made within literary narratology. The distinctions between *misevaluating* and *misreporting* (Phelan/Martin 1999) or *normative* and *factual unreliability* (A. Nünning 1998b: 12–13), which have gained general acceptance, are not identical, however, with the distinction between my literary and filmic prototypes, since the literary narrator often misreports on the basis of his erroneous judgments (as is the case in "Dead as They Come"), and in the filmic prototype false evaluations play a significant role as well, even if not at the level of narration but of reception.

It is more important in my opinion to ask whether the narrator or narration intends to deceive or not, whether the reader or spectator recognizes unreliability (in whatever form) immediately or only retrospectively, and whether this insight is conveyed explicitly or implicitly.

Literature and Film: A Transmedial Comparison

Scholars who use the term unreliable narration for examples corresponding to the filmic prototype usually stress the differences between literary and filmic narration, among other things the fact that filmic narration appears as an impersonal, abstract entity without psychological attributes.[17] In film, personal narrators in the form of voice-over or character-narrators are only optional ingredients at a secondary level, and contrary to the literary narrator their verbal utterances only cover part of the entire discourse. If one accepts these premises, it would seem logical to conclude that the narrative constellation in the literary prototype is not possible in film. In this view, film scholars are right to call for a modification of the concept.

17 E.g. Liptay/Wolf (2005b: 13–14), Helbig (2005: 131–134), Lahde (2005: 294), Laass (2006: 254–256), Orth (2006: 286–288) and Poppe (2009: 70).

But are the differences really such that the narrative form closest to literary unreliability should be one which in many respects appears, as we have seen, more different than similar? And how about literary fiction such as Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1890)[18] or Leo Perutz' *Zwischen neun und neun* (1918)[19] which correspond exactly to the filmic prototype, but are not usually considered as unreliable narratives?[20] Otherwise the common view that only homodiegetic and overt narrators can be unreliable would become obsolete, since both stories are told by heterodiegetic and predominantly covert narrators.[21] For the kind of unreliability based on false leads and twist endings, the question whether a homodiegetic narrator is (partly) responsible for the narration is only of secondary import as regards the basic effect of the narrative structure.[22]

The Literary Prototype in Film (and Vice-versa)

I will subsequently show that there are several narrative constellations in film which are much closer to the literary than the filmic prototype. Among the already mentioned properties of the literary prototype, I consider as central the inadequate perspective of a personal narrator, which the reader or spectator figures out quickly, and the ironic form with an explicit and implicit meaning directly opposed to one another. As we have seen, the filmic prototype displays none of these characteristics. However, before film scholars mainly concentrated on this latter narrative form, another had been proposed as unreliable narration in film[23] which fulfils at least some of the requirements: i.e. films in which voice-over narration is in conflict with a simultaneously presented scene, as is the case of *Badlands* (Terrence Malick, USA 1973) or *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, USA 1994). In the former, the character-narrator adopts a romantic view of her lover, whose behaviour in the scenic presentation is revealed to be ruthless. In the latter, the naïve view of Forrest Gump clashes with the conveyed visual information, as when he tells his addressee about his girlfriend's father: "He was a very loving man. He was always kissing and touching her and her sisters," while we are shown a rude drunkard sexually molesting his daughter.

18 The short film *La rivière du hibou*, mentioned above, is based on Bierce's short story.

19 Just as in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," a large part of the events narrated in Perutz' novel turn out to be a mere fantasy of the dying protagonist who jumped from the roof of a building to escape from two policemen.

20 Martinez and Scheffel are among the few who classify novels such as Perutz' *Zwischen neun und neun* as a form of factual unreliability ("mimetisch teilweise unzuverlässiges Erzählen," 2002 [1999]: 102–103), but by doing so they contradict their own definition of unreliable narration as a form of ironic communication (100–101).

21 It is revealing that literary scholars who consider the possibility of unreliable heterodiegetic narrators (e.g. Cohn 2000; Yacobi 2001; Fludernik 2005) refer to narrative constellations that differ from the two examples mentioned above as well as from the filmic prototype.

22 Cf. Vogt's analysis of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and *Fight Club* (2009: 43–51).

23 See, for example, Chatman (1978: 235–236) and Kozloff (1988: 112–126). Cf. Ferenz (2005: 145–148).

In these two examples, there are personal narrators whose commentary appears inappropriate. But, contrary to the literary prototype, the discrepancy is conveyed *explicitly*. Hence it would seem wrong, strictly speaking, to call this form ironic, as irony, at least in a narrow sense, is based solely on the *implication* of an opposite meaning. Better examples of an *implicit* second meaning are Miloš Forman's *Amadeus* (USA 1984), where the characterization of Mozart's attitude and behaviour through the character-narrator Salieri is *only indirectly* undermined by the narrative situation and the presentation of events, and Oldrich Lipsky's *Happy End* (Czechoslovakia 1967), where the voice-over narrator assumes conventional "forward" causality although the events unfold backwards. Ironic constellations with personal narrators are therefore possible in film, but not easily achieved, since verbal narration is usually either explicitly confirmed or contradicted by the audiovisual presentation of events.

Ironic Commentary by the Impersonal Filmic Narration

If the irony typical of the literary prototype is difficult to find at the level of character narration in film, perhaps we should look for it in impersonal narration? One of the few studies which goes in this direction is Eva Laass' *Broken Taboos, Subjective Truths* (2008). Laass discusses Oliver Stone's controversial film *Natural Born Killers* (USA 1994) which tells the story of two lovers on a killing spree who become modern folk heroes due to increasing mass media coverage and glorification. The film caused a public dispute not only because of its subject matter, but also due to its postmodern aesthetics, characterized by permanent changes in texture and style.

Among film critics and cultural commentators there was much debate about the moral attitude of Stone's film. Some authors saw a satirical condemnation of sensationalism and violence behind the ostensible celebration of excess and brutality. This reading presupposes that the explicit message (violence and its exploitation by the media are cool) stands in opposition to an implicit message (the central problem of American society is the fact that violence is regarded as cool and is ruthlessly exploited by the media). Other commentators opined that a movie which exploits extreme violence itself by showing it in such a cool and stylized fashion

cannot pretend to this kind of ironic or satirical critique. Laass herself concludes rather negatively in her analysis:

> Although the film contains a considerable number of signals encouraging this interpretation [of unreliable narration] and a consistent fashioning of the narrative mediation accordingly might have solved the problems a lot of recipients had with the film, the projection of normatively unreliable implicit narration onto the story's mediation therefore ultimately does not quite work. Examples in which it does actually work have still to be either found or made, at least to my knowledge. (2008: 134–135)

In spite of this negative assessment, Laass mentions an episode of *Natural Born Killers* in which the attribution of unreliability to the impersonal filmic narration seems to work: namely the sequence of events titled "I Love Mallory" showing the first encounter of the protagonists Mickey and Mallory. Staged in the manner of a tv sitcom, the episode introduces us to Mallory's incestuous father, lachrymose mother and dim-witted brother. The father's rude jokes and harassments are all accompanied by intense cheering and clapping. Since we are not dealing with a real sitcom, of course, but the staging of a scene in the lives of the two protagonists in the manner of a sitcom, the laughter and applause cannot be attributed to a diegetic audience, but have to be interpreted as a commentary by the filmic discourse. And since the behaviour of the father is shown to be utterly repugnant, an ironic reading of this commentary seems appropriate.

An even more convincing instance of this form of ironic commentary on the level of impersonal narration is *Einspruch III* (*Objection III*, Rolando Colla), a Swiss short film from 2002. The story is about a group of refugees seeking asylum in Switzerland. Shortly after having crossed the border, they are arrested and sent back to where they came from. One of the refugees has an artificial leg, which is left behind on the morning of their deportation. When he realises that his prosthesis is missing, he tries in vain to convince the police to turn around. The film ends with two policemen arguing about how to best dispose of the lost leg.

Just as in the episode from *Natural Born Killers* discussed above, the most striking feature of this short film is its soundtrack of laughter and applause, well-known from sitcoms. The cheering and clapping is most prominent in scenes where the situation of the one-legged refugee worsens. Taken literally, it functions as a cynical commentary, making fun of a handicapped and distressed North African asylum seeker, while approving of inhumane police action. Everybody I spoke to about the film, nonetheless, immediately qualified it as a severe indictment of Switzerland's merciless refugee policy. In the reception process the meaning of the explicit commentary is thus reversed and understood as the exact opposite. The two examples might be exceptions, nevertheless they demonstrate that impersonal filmic narration is capable of irony, at least in the form of comments meaning the opposite of what they explicitly express.

From Impersonal to Personalized Filmic Narration

We have therefore come closer to the literary prototype, without having reached it yet. The special appeal of the literary prototype is due to unreliability being projected on a (personal) narrator responsible for the explicit discourse in its entirety. In *Amadeus* and *Happy End*, solely the first part of this condition is fulfilled, in the "I love Mallory"-episode and *Objection III* only the second. And if we accept that at its uppermost level filmic narration is always impersonal, then the literary prototype is out of reach for film.

In the following, I would like to question this very idea. It is based on the assumption that to narrate by means of sound and image about past events is—contrary to verbal narration—not a common form of human expression. Therefore it appears much more natural to presuppose a personal narrator when reading a novel than when watching a film. Moreover, film production is a collective enterprise which normally resists the projection of a single entity responsible for the overall design of the work.

However reasonable this view seems, it ignores the exceptional case in which a filmmaker is established as being responsible for the film's narration, not on a secondary level as the author of a film within the film, but on a primary level as the instance responsible for all images and sounds. Just as novelists can create narrators who appear to be in charge of the narration, filmmakers may invent directors appearing to be in charge of narration. As a result of this operation we get fake documentaries in which fictional filmmakers report on their lives or the lives of others. Examples of this kind are *David Holzman's Diary* (Jim McBride, USA 1967) or *Zusje* (*Little Sister*, Robert Jan Westdijk, Netherlands 1995).[24] The narrative constellation in these films corresponds to first-person narratives in literature, where the narrator claims to report on real events and persons he has known and observed.

24 For an analysis of *David Holzman's Diary* as an example of first-person filmic narration see Brinckmann 1997.

The Unreliability of Personalized Narration in *Man Bites Dog*

The question now is whether filmic narration which has thus become personalized may be as unreliable as the first-person narrator in literature. An example of this kind would confirm the hypothesis that the narrative constellation of the literary prototype, often labelled "genuinely literary" (e.g. Martinez/Scheffel 2002 [1999]: 101), may also be found in film. *C'est arrivé près de chez vous* (*Man Bites Dog*, Rémy Belvaux/André Bonzel/Benoit Poelvoorde, Belgium 1992) is just such an example. It pretends to be a documentary about Ben's daily life as shot by three filmmakers. Ben's occupation, murdering and robbing people, is, however, rather uncommon. What is striking about this mockumentary is that the filmmakers, who repeatedly appear onscreen or are heard on the soundtrack, not only let Ben go on with his killings without interfering, but they eventually even participate in the murders. Moreover, they ask Ben all kinds of questions, but never why he is killing people or how he feels about what he is doing. This omission is foregrounded in a scene in which Ben, chasing a victim, loses his bracelet. The film director immediately asks him whether the lost bracelet has an emotional value to him, to which he gives a prolonged, affirmative answer. The film crew's attitude can thus be qualified as unreliable in the sense of Phelan and Martins *underreporting*. In addition, an analysis of the film's aesthetic qualities provides further examples of *misreporting*, as when the filmmakers show Ben's killings in a swift montage-sequence, thus making an effort to present his activities in a stylish manner worthy of their admiration, or when they help Ben to dispose of the victim and laugh at his racist and sexist jokes.

The explicit message of the fictional documentary is therefore: Ben's behaviour is funny, admirable, and a good example to be followed. Analytical detachment or critical questions are not necessary. The implicit meaning of *Man Bites Dog*, however, must be understood as the exact opposite: a sharp critique of reality-tv shows and their lack of critical stance towards their protagonists. The fictional filmmakers are not aware of this implicit meaning, even though their roles are played by the real filmmakers themselves. The controversial reactions provoked by the mockumentary reveal that not all spectators were willing to make this distinction. An ironic reading, however, is possible and demonstrates that filmic narration is capable of unreliability corresponding to the literary prototype.

The following table lists examples of the narrative constellations discussed as literary and filmic prototypes and shows that literature is perfectly suited for the kind of unreliability generally associated with film and, vice versa, that the kind of unreliability generally associated with literature

is also possible in film. The examples in bold print are those not usually considered in terms of unreliable narration.

unreliable narration	literary prototype	filmic prototype
literature	*Huckleberry Finn* (Mark Twain); "Haircut" (Ring Lardner); "Dead as They Come" (Ian McEwan); "Oil of Dog" (Ambrose Bierce)	**"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (Ambrose Bierce); *Zwischen neun und neun* (Leo Perutz)**
film	***Man Bites Dog* (Belvaux/Bonzel/Poelvoorde)**	*La Rivière du Hibou* (Robert Enrico); *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan); *A Beautiful Mind* (Ron Howard)

The following table includes films with character-narrators and details some of the aspects that have been analysed in order to establish differences between various kinds of unreliable narration.[25] The comparison shows that the filmic prototype without character-narrator and the literary prototype are more dissimilar than any other two groups of examples. And it demonstrates that fake documentaries with personalized narration, although to my knowledge hardly ever discussed in relation to unreliable narration, may feature narrative structures much closer to the literary prototype than often cited films such as *Stage Fright*, *Fight Club* or *A Beautiful Mind*.

25 As mentioned above, my distinctions cut across the difference between normative and factual unreliability. There is a partial match, though, since the literary prototype has an affinity to the former and the filmic prototype to the latter. But this link is not exclusive, since mis- or underreporting does not necessarily mislead readers/spectators (filmic prototype), but can just as well be detected from the start (literary prototype).

unreliable narration	literary prototype				(variant of filmic prototype)	(variant of filmic prototype)	filmic prototype
literature	*Huckleberry Finn*; "Haircut," "Dead as They Come,"	–	–	–	*Fight Club* (novel)	*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*	"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," *Zwischen neun und neun*
film	*Man Bites Dog*	*Einspruch III*, "I Love Mallory"-episode	*Happy End*, *Amadeus*	*Badlands*, *Forrest Gump*	*Fight Club* (film)	*Stage Fright*, *The Usual Suspects*	*La Rivière du Hibou*, *The Sixth Sense*, *A Beautiful Mind*
personalized narration	yes	no	only partly	only partly	literature: yes, film: only partly	literature: yes, film: only partly	no
alternative version explicitly	no	no	no	yes	yes	yes	yes
early/gradual revelation of unreliability	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	no
Is the reader/spectator given false leads?	no	no	no	no	yes	yes	yes
Is the character-narrator lying/deceiving?	no	–	no	no	no	yes	–
distribution of knowledge (>: knows more than; =: knows the same as; < knows less than)	reader > narrator/spectator > personalized narration	spectator = narration > characters	spectator = narration > character-narrator	spectator = narration > character- narrator	before plot twist: spectator = character-narrator as experiencing I < character-narrator as narrating I	before plot twist:: reader < narrator/ spectator < character-narrator	before plot twist: reader/spectator = character < heterodiegetic narrator/ impersonal narration

A Poorly Defined Concept Changes Meaning

How did this shift in meaning of the concept of unreliable narration come about? And what part did transdisciplinary adaptation play in this process? Contrary to what my opposition between literary and filmic prototypes—which admittedly is an ahistorical simplification[26]—could make believe, the change in meaning was gradual rather than abrupt. Let us look at the question of who deceives whom as a good instance of this transformation by degrees. Booth specified his well-known definition[27] of the unreliable narrator as follows:

> It is true that most of the great reliable narrators indulge in large amounts of incidental irony, and they are thus 'unreliable' in the sense of being potentially deceptive. But difficult irony is not sufficient to make a narrator unreliable. Nor is unreliability ordinarily a matter of lying, although deliberately deceptive narrators have been a major resource of some modern novelists [...]. It is most often a matter of what James calls *inconscience*; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him. Or, as in *Huckleberry Finn*, the narrator claims to be naturally wicked while the author silently praises his virtues behind his back. (1983 [1961]: 159)

Booth does not exclude lying and consciously deceiving narrators altogether, but he insists on the fact that the concept primarily applies to cases in which the narrator tells his story with honest intentions and appears unreliable to the reader only because of his naïve or narrow-minded point-of-view. This specification is important with regard to the irony of the constellation, which disappears (at least in a strict sense) if the narrator is lying and thus knows the "true" state of affairs. The liar nevertheless soon appeared in typologies of unreliable narrators along with the pervert, the clown or the madman, as Ansgar Nünning has observed in his systematic overview (2005: 94).

Chatman's interdisciplinary *Story and Discourse* (1978) is of special interest in this context. In his discussion of the unreliable narrator in literature he goes along with Booth's definition and cites examples which mostly correspond to our literary prototype (1978: 233). As filmic counterparts he analyses Robert Bresson's *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (*Diary of a Country Priest*, France 1950), in which the commentary of a voice-over narrator is

26 A more nuanced analysis would have to include examples of narrative ambivalence, such as Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), which are sometimes also classified as unreliable narration, even though their main characteristic—the extended hesitation of the reader between two possible interpretations (Todorov's "fantastic mode" in *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, 1970)—is typical neither of the literary nor the filmic prototype.

27 "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not" (Booth 1983 [1961]: 158–159).

"corrected" by the scenic presentation of the events, and Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* (USA/GB 1950) with its famous "lying" flashback (1978: 235–237). In doing so, Chatman does not revise his previous definition of unreliable narration, despite the fact that neither of the two filmic examples correspond to it: the former because of its explicitness and lack of irony, the latter for the same reason and the deliberate misleading of the spectator (resulting in a reversal of the knowledge asymmetry typical of the literary prototype).[28]

Bordwell (who does not refer to Booth) changes the concept even further in the direction of the filmic prototype. He calls *Stage Fright* "the canonic case of unreliable narration in classical cinema" (1985: 61) and *Secret Beyond the Door* (Fritz Lang, USA 1947) "'unreliable' narration par excellence" (83). In both films the spectator is prompted to make wrong inferences which are only corrected much later in a surprising plot twist. But contrary to *Stage Fright*, in *Secret Beyond the Door* the misleading information does not come from a character-narrator but directly from the impersonal cinematic narration which elicits false conclusions by skipping over crucial events.

Sarah Kozloff cites similar examples as Chatman (e.g. *Taxi Driver*, Martin Scorsese, USA 1976; *Badlands*; *Stage Fright*) and she points out that there is a difference between deceiving others and deluding oneself: "At any rate, not all unreliable narrators are liars and murderers. We take some narrators with a pinch of salt just because they are naive or limited" (1988: 112–116). Kozloff is closer to Booth's notion again, but her phrasing shows how much the understanding of the concept has already changed, since while Booth claimed that unreliability is "not ordinarily" a matter of lying, Kozloff has to caution against the notion that all unreliable narrators are liars.

A good instance of the inconsiderate shift from ironic distance to surprising plot twists is Gerald Prince's entry in his *Dictionary of Narratology* (2003 [1987]: 103). Prince almost literally takes up Booth's definition, but the only filmic example he cites—besides two literary ones: Lardner's "Haircut" and Camus' *La Chute*—is *Stage Fright*, which does not correspond to it. The notion in particular of a "narrator the reliability of whose account is undermined by various features of that account" does not apply to the secondary narration (the "lying" flashback) in Hitchcock's film, since its veracity is not put into question by that narrative segment itself, but only much later by the primary narration.

28 In *Coming to Terms* (1990: 149), Chatman explicitly mentions "mendacity" (along with "inconscience" and "naiveté") as possible reasons for the unreliablility of a literary narrator.

More recent, especially German-language, publications on unreliable narration in film focus mainly on false leads and surprising plot twists,[29] a development which very likely has been advanced by the fact that films of such narrative constellations have become very popular since the 1990s.

The question who deceives whom is connected (but not equivalent) to the question of when a discrepancy becomes obvious. The lie of a narrator can be presented so as to make sure the reader or spectator is suspicious from the start and soon figures it out. Or it can be designed to be unmasked only at the end of the narration. For Booth, only the former could have counted as an exceptional case of unreliable narration, since the latter lacks in irony. Kozloff accepts them both, and later publications in film narratology mainly focus on the latter.

Another difference between literary and filmic prototypes concerns the question who is being deceived. In the former, it is the narrator, while in the latter it is the main character and spectator. In this respect, Booth's position was already ambiguous, since he did not restrict the term unreliable narrator to narrating characters, but also included reflectors, whose experience is mediated by the narration (e.g. Pinkie in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock;* Booth 1983 [1961]: 156). Even though this confusion between the experiencing and narrating instance has been criticised by Stanzel (1995 [1979]: 202–203) and by Chatman (1990: 150–151), it can still be observed in film theory. If the difference between experiencing and narrating the experience is reduced, the distance between the literary and filmic prototypes also diminishes.

To account for the gradual change in meaning of concepts such as the unreliable narrator is a difficult task, especially given the growing number of publications on the topic. Instead of going into further details of the transfer, I would like to add two general remarks: One source of confusion seems to have been that Booth, although he had a specific narrative constellation in mind, only gave a rather imprecise definition of the concept and at the same time, with the expression "unreliable," made use of a common and somewhat ambiguous term. Hence it is not surprising that narrators who deceive readers were soon, according to the general understanding of the word, classified as unreliable. A second problem regarding transdisciplinary adaptation seems to be the eagerness with which film scholars usually stress differences between literature and film. This attitude is responsible for the all too quick willingness to modify literary concepts regardless of important and unacknowledged alterations.

29 See, for instance, a number of contributions by film scholars in Liptay/Wolf (2005a) and Helbig (2006a). Cf. footnote 10.

Unreliable Narration as a Transmedial Phenomenon

I have tried to describe the characteristic features of the literary and filmic prototypes so as to enable an unbiased transmedial comparison. The result of this evaluation was that neither of the two constellations are medium-specific. In concluding, I would like to provide evidence for this claim on a more theoretical level by making use of Wolf Schmid's ideal-genetic model (2005: 241–272).

Schmid's model distinguishes between happenings, story, narrative and the presentation of the narrative. The story is the result of a selection of specific situations, actions, characters and their qualities derived from the entirety of happenings implied in the work. The narrative is the result of a process of composition of the chosen happenings and their qualities (for instance their temporal permutation). And the presentation of the narrative consists of its verbalisation in literature and its audiovisual realisation in film. Only the "last" of these operations is medium-specific, the "former" two are not.[30]

The interesting question in our context now is, on which "level" to situate the features characteristic of unreliable narration. Take the literary prototype. If we assume that personalized narration is possible in both film and literature, then the assignment of narrative activity to a personal narrator appears to be an operation on the "second to last" level. The "last" and medium-specific step would simply consist in having the personal narrator use the corresponding "language" (i.e. words or sounds and images). The question whether the narrator's reporting and commentary appear reliable depends to a large degree on the selection and qualification of happenings, an operation even further removed from the "last," medium-specific step.[31] The same holds true for irony. If the opposition of explicit and implicit messages is possible by means of sounds and images as well as by words, then establishing an ironic constellation is also an operation "prior" to verbal or audiovisual presentation.

The issue of the filmic prototype is even more clear-cut. Both the temporary withholding of crucial information and the alignment of the spectator or reader with the protagonist are mainly based on the selection and temporal permutation of situations, characters, and actions, i.e. of operations on the "first" and "second" levels of Schmid's model.

30 All terms denoting a temporal succession are of course to be understood metaphorically (hence the quotation marks), since Schmid's model is an ideal-genetic concept which neither describes a work's history of production nor its history of reception. See Schmid (2005: 248–249).

31 Schmid only situates commentaries of a purely interpretive nature at the 'last' step.

That neither the literary nor the filmic prototypes are medium-specific does not mean, of course, that they are equally common and function in exactly the same way and to the same effect in either media. An analysis of medium-specific differences would have to start here and examine both constellations in either media more closely.

One final point: There is no implied quality judgment in my comparison of the narrative constellations in film and literature. I appreciate the ironic distancing of the one as much as the emphatic immersion and final surprise of the other. What needs to be stressed is their specificity, which an inconsiderate use of the umbrella term "unreliable narration" tends to obscure.

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